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## **SMOKING SECTIONS FADING**

Smokers face a new filter

**By Russ Lane**  
**The Sun News**

Back in the 1990s when he was manager of Greg Norman's Australian Grille, Reese Wesner was caught in the smoker/nonsmoker crossfire.

Wesner, now manager of the smoke-free City Bar, was the one who had to tell patrons that most of the grill's interiors were smoke-free.

"Boy, I got cussed out," Wesner said. "People would say, 'You're right in the middle of the tobacco belt!' On the other hand, I had as many people that came there for that, and it's the same thing that's happening today."

Legislation that would have limited smoking statewide was defeated by the S.C. House in April, but restaurant industry officials say a growing number of eateries on the Grand Strand are choosing to go smoke-free, and there are efforts in the works to compile a list for diners who need to know if smoking is - or is not - banned.

In the wake of the failed statewide vote, Hilton Head Island is proposing a ban in all indoor restaurants and workplaces, which will likely be before its town council in September. Sullivans Island's workplaces were the first to be smoke-free in the state. Columbia is considering its own ban, and the University of South Carolina has greatly restricted on-campus smoking.

"The restaurant industry is extremely divided on this issue, probably half and half," Tom Sponseller, president of the S.C. Hospitality Association, said earlier this year as the S.C. bill was being debated.

The association did not take a position on the issue, and some House members argued the matter should be up to individual business owners.

"I think it's absolutely ludicrous for the state government to become a nanny and tell people what they can and can't do in a private business," said Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach said at the time.

A growing number of restaurants are making that decision, said Pauline Levesque, executive director of the Myrtle Beach Area Hospitality Association. Within the past year, the number of no-smoking restaurants has steadily increased locally, she said, though she didn't have specific numbers.

"Some of the areas that a business might fear would be hampered by going nonsmoking hadn't really happened," she said.

Two groups are trying to compile numbers and lists of eateries that prohibit smoking.

The Breathe Coalition, a Conway-based interest group sponsored by S.C. Tobacco Collaborative, is constructing a smoke-free dining guide for the Grand Strand, said creator Larry White.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control is compiling a statewide listing of smoke-free restaurants on its Web site. So far, Pizza Hut locations are the only smoke-free restaurants listed for Myrtle Beach, North Myrtle Beach and Georgetown.

While others tally, restaurants are making their own decisions on smoking. The Melting Pot is among the new additions. The fondue restaurant had steadily decreased its interior smoking sections to two tables near the bar.

This summer, manager Keith Dunn began giving the smoking ban a trial run.

"It is one of those things [that] is a hot-button issue ... It seems the tide has kind of turned the other way," he said.

Others have benefited from offering smoking areas. "I've had a few that come in [and say], 'Oh, thank God I've found a place,'" said Ed Ward of Socastee's Sub Stop. "They've been chased out of everywhere else."

And then there are restaurants trying to find a middle ground.

Fat Jack's Wings & Things in Surfside Beach allows smoking but doesn't put ashtrays on the tables.

For those who don't smoke, specialized technology attached to the fans is intended to remove traces of smoke, dust and airborne particles.

Owner Maria Kovacks won't ban smoking. But that doesn't mean she welcomes smoke with open arms.

"The general atmosphere discourages it," she said. "It's an effort toward a healthier atmosphere and environment. It's not being dictatorial and not pushing a rule that really hasn't been passed. And I hope by the time South Carolina does do that, it won't be a defiant act, but that people slowly change their lifestyles."

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